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ABSTRACT

The novels of Robert Lipsyte are excellent for use in a middle school or secondary school classroom. His 1967 classic, "The Contender," and its sequel, "The Brave," are both strong on characterization, plot, and theme. Focusing on "The Contender," students can explore contending characters, forces, and themes. Related novels, films, and nonfiction works can give students and their teachers added insight into the complex and ambiguous world of "The Contender," the world of boxing. A list of discussion topics for teaching, related works, and author information may be of help to the classroom teacher in teaching "The Contender." (A brief passage by Robert Lipsyte in which he describes the inspiration for "The Contender" is attached.) (RS)

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USING THE CONTENDER BY ROBERT LIPSYTE

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OVERVIEW

The novels of Robert Lipsyte are excellent for use in a middle school or secondary school classroom. The 1967 classic, The Contender, and Lipsyte's recently written sequel, The Brave, are both strong in characterization, plot, and theme. Using the dramatic world of boxing--a sport which combines both grace and brutality, skill and mayhem, play and death--Lipsyte weaves his plot and moves his characters with skill and insight.

Written some 25 years ago, The Contender remains a powerful and accurate description of a young person's attempt to leave the street behind and make something of himself. While some of the contemporary traps and lures that can ensnare an urban young person may be a bit different in detail, they remain the same in outline as in The Contender, and many readers will experience a shock of recognition as they read Alfred's struggles to be somebody.

Focusing on The Contender, students can explore the opposing or contending characters of the novels, the contending forces which come into play within the novel, and the varying, contending themes.

In the novel, Alfred must define himself against the members of his gang, against his supportive, well meaning aunt, against his tragic best friend, against the demanding but fair

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gym owner. He must find his place between the very different worlds represented by Harlem and Queens, make some sort of compromise between the opposing poles of Black moderates and Black radicals, establish a kind of peace between the chaos of the street and the discipline of the gym and, finally, determine where he might fit between the life of the mind and the life of the body. Finally, within this rich novel, Alfred confronts a myriad of tasks: he begins the journey of the hero, attempts to follow his dream, makes an effort to come of age, tests the limits of friendship with James, and, for himself and others, defines what he can accept as a personal definition of being a contender.

Related novels and nonfiction works, not to mention a number of prize-winning films, can give students and their teachers added insight into this complex and ambiguous world of The Contender, the world of boxing. Both beautiful and awful, pure in concept and often woefully corrupt in practice, boxing is both intriguing and repellant to many, and Robert Lipsyte's masterful novel, The Contender, represents not only that world but a wider set of truths and dilemmas.

The following lists of topics and resources may be of help to the classroom teacher in using and teaching The Contender.

DISCUSSION TOPICS FOR TEACHING, RELATED WORKS, AND AUTHOR INFORMATION

I. Discussion Areas for The Contender (Harper and Row, 1967)

A. Contending Characters

Alfred (aka Uncle Alfred) v. the Gang (James, Sonny, Hollis, Major)

Alfred v. Aunt Pearl

Alfred v. James

Alfred v. Mr. Donatelli

B. Contending Forces

Harlem v. Queens

Black Radicals v. Black Moderates

Discipline (the Gym) v. Chaos (the Street)

Life of the Mind (Jeff, Bill Witherspoon) v. Life of the Body

C. Contending Themes

The Importance of the Journey

Following a Dream

Coming of Age

Limits of Friendship

Definition of A Contender

II. Related Works

A. Also by Robert Lipsyte: The Brave, HarperCollins, 1991

Free to Be Muhammad Ali, HarperCollins, 1978

Assignment: Sports

B. Films: Requiem for a Heavyweight (with Anthony Quinn)

On the Waterfront (with Marlon Brando, Karl Malden, Eva Marie Saint)

Fat City (with Stacy Keach)

Raging Bull (with Robert DeNiro)

Rocky series (with Sylvester Stallone)

C. Other Sports Novels: The Skating Rink, Mildred Lee; The Moves Make the Man, Bruce Brooks; Stotan!, Chris Crutcher; Hoops, Walter Dean Myers

III. The Author

Robert Lipsyte has been a sportswriter for The New York Times and a columnist for the New York Post. He has won an Emmy for his work as host of the PBS talk show The Eleventh Hour, and his books have received awards from the New York Times, the American Library Association, and the Child Study Association.

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"On a magical night 25 years ago this month, an ancient boxing shaman told me a story without an ending, a fabulous gift that transformed me into the most rewarded of genre writers, the novelist for teen-agers...I was in Las Vegas to cover the heavyweight title match between Muhammad Ali and Floyd Patterson, and...this old man, Cus D'Amato, who had once managed Floyd, was a reporter's trove of arcana and insight. After dinner...Cus reminisced about the night he had waited by the door of his old ghetto gym, listening for the footsteps of a 'contender.'

"If a kid came up those dark, narrow, twisting flights of stairs alone and running scared, said Cus, there was a chance he might stay with it, hang tough, find himself through dedication and sacrifice. Fear, said Cus, was like a fire. It can destroy you or it can make you a hero, a contender in the ring and in life.

"I sat up the rest of that night aflame. To me, at 27, being a contender meant writing fiction. I had never made it up those stairs because I had nothing to say. But now I had questions to answer. What kind of kid would come up those dark stairs? What would he be running from? Toward? There was only one way to find out."

- Robert Lipsyte, Book Review, Los Angeles Times, November 18, 1990